

Special Year-End Issue

Read the United Methodist Church's Review of News for 2007

United Methodists looked outward, inward, in '07

United Methodists called for justice, advocated for peace and assisted victims of both natural and economic disasters during 2007.

At the same time, the denomination looked inward, setting a focus for its mission and ministry and developing strategies to increase and strengthen its membership.

A crucial concern for justice has arisen in the Philippines. United Methodists continue to speak out about the estimated 800 extra-judicial killings and abductions that have occurred there since President Gloria Arroyo took office in 2001.

One of the most powerful United Methodist voices in 2007 was that of Philippine Supreme Court Chief Justice Reynato Puno, who held a summit in Manila on the extra-judicial killings, putting a spotlight on the nation's human rights crisis. The summit included representatives from the judicial, executive and legislative branches of government, as well as scholars, members of the legal profession, the militant left, religious leaders and media.

On Sept. 25, the Supreme Court in Manila approved a Puno-supported court rule on the writ of amparo, under which the military or police cannot simply deny involvement in abductions or extra-judicial killings. Rather, they also must prove they are not involved and, under court order, open their detention facilities for inspection.

Withdrawal from Iraq

In November, the bishops of The United Methodist Church declared war "incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ" and called on leaders of all nations to begin an immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq. The bishops also urged against deploying additional troops to Iraq and against establishing permanent military bases in the Middle Eastern country.

In addition to calling for the immediate safe and full withdrawal of troops, the bishops called on the United States and other coalition-force nations to initiate and support a plan for the reconstruction of Iraq, giving strong priority to the humanitarian and social needs of the Iraqi people. They urged increased support for veterans of the Iraq war and all wars.

The resolution is the council's latest action questioning the Iraq war. In 2005, the bishops urged U.S. President George W. Bush, who is United Methodist, to create a timeline to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq.

Among United Methodists joining an Oct. 8 interfaith fast for peace and an end to the war in Iraq was Jim Winkler, top executive of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, who noted earlier that his agency "has been the most resolute and consistent voice of opposition to the war" within the denomination.

Virginia Tech, Jena Six

The Wesley Foundation of Virginia Tech University became a safe haven for students

immediately after a deadly shooting spree there on April 16, which left 33 dead and 15 wounded, and a spiritual hub for grief and prayer as the campus community began to come to grips with the tragedy.

In response to the shooting, the Board of Church and Society also renewed the denomination's call for governments around the world to ban ownership by the general public of handguns, assault weapons, automatic weapon conversion kits and weapons that cannot be detected by traditional metal-detection devices.

Both Church and Society and the Women's Division of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries called for justice in the case of the "Jena Six," a group of six black students facing criminal prosecution in the beating of a white student in Jena, La.

When tens of thousands of protesters showed up in Jena on Sept. 20, most businesses closed, but the predominantly white Nolley Memorial United Methodist Church remained open and provided hospitality to some of the primarily African-American marchers.

Immigration concerns

In a June 19 letter to the U.S. Senate, seven United Methodist agencies and organizations opposed the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007 and called for "genuine reform" that would allow immigrant families to "achieve their American dreams."

The groups said Senate Bill 1348 "fails to achieve" any of the goals advocated by the church and other proponents of genuine comprehensive immigration reform. These goals include reunification of families, a fair earned pathway to citizenship and humanitarian border policies that maintain the civil liberties of all people. The bill failed to pass.

Elvira Arellano, an illegal immigrant and member of Adalberto United Methodist Church in Chicago, was arrested in California and deported to Mexico on Aug. 19, four days after she left the Chicago church where she had received sanctuary for a year with her 8-year-old son, Saul, a U.S. citizen.

Arellano announced during an Aug. 15 news conference and immigration rally at Adalberto that, after several weeks of fasting and praying, she had decided to leave the church and speak out for immigration reform. Bishop Hee-Soo Jung, episcopal leader of the United Methodist Northern Illinois Annual Conference, said the conference has supported Arellano and the church for the past year.

Providing disaster relief

Throughout 2007, the United Methodist Committee on Relief continued to fund long-term recovery projects related to 2005's Hurricane Katrina and the South Asian tsunami which occurred at the end of 2004.

At a special Katrina summit in September, United Methodist volunteers from across the United States were welcomed, thanked and challenged to keep coming to the Gulf Coast. More than 63,000 United Methodist volunteers from 42 states, two foreign countries and 60 annual conferences have come to the aid of the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina stormed ashore on Aug. 29, 2005.

United Methodist bishops also distributed \$2 million in February to assist Gulf Coast churches and pastors affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

An additional \$4.7 million in aid to economically vulnerable Sri Lankans, still finding their footing after the tsunami, was approved in April by UMCOR directors. Major tsunami recovery work also continued in Indonesia.

The agency was called to assist in new, smaller emergencies throughout the year, working in tandem with annual conferences.

They responded to tornados that struck central Florida and rural Arkansas in February, Alabama in March and Kansas in May. After a powerful tornado roared through Enterprise, Ala., on March 1, killing nine people, including eight high school students, Enterprise First United Methodist Church welcomed hundreds of youth for a special worship service to remember their dead and injured classmates and begin the emotional process of healing. Another church near the high school offered hot meals to storm victims, relief workers and school employees.

Churches also responded to flooding that plagued parts of the United States from mid-June through August.

United Methodist response to the October wildfires in southern California is occurring primarily in the San Diego area, with a focus on secondary victims of the fires.

International relief efforts extended beyond the tsunami-related programs. As part of a continuing collaboration, UMCOR and Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City, Ohio, began a four-year relief project to reestablish water supplies and improve sanitation in refugee camps in Darfur, Sudan. Since 2005, Ginghamburg Church has raised more than \$1.8 million for its work with UMCOR in Sudan.

UMCOR's partnership agreement with Muslim Aid, the London-based global relief and development agency, allows the two agencies to work together on peace building and poverty reducing programs around the world. The partnership was signed June 26 at the House of Commons.

U.S. membership down, giving up

In an attempt to focus the mission and ministry of the church at the dawn of the 21st century, the denomination has selected four areas of focus: leadership development, congregational growth, global health and ministry with the poor. The areas of focus have been affirmed by church leadership at all levels, including the Council of Bishops, the Connectional Table, agency boards and many annual conferences.

"This is Our Story," a 2007 report from the denomination's Council on Finance and Administration, showed the church's membership is growing throughout the world but shrinking in the United States. And a shrinking U.S. church base means a smaller impact on society, according to a denominational task force on funding patterns within the church.

Statistics for 2005, the latest available, show worldwide professing and baptized membership at 13.75 million in more than 50 countries, compared with 11.35 million in 1995. U.S. professing membership is 7,995,429, compared with 8,075,010 the previous year, a decline of nearly 1 percent. Membership has decreased by more

than 1.9 million members, or 19 percent, since 1974.

Despite the decrease, giving is up. The church gave almost \$5.9 billion during 2005, representing an increase in giving for the 15th straight year when adjusted for inflation, and data indicates the average income of a United Methodist is growing faster than in the general population.

To stimulate membership growth, the United Methodist Board of Discipleship has organized a strategy team on new congregational development. The goal of "Path One" is to start 650 new congregations by 2012. Other goals include doubling the number of young people serving as pastors and church leaders, and expanding ministries with the poor, according to denominational leaders during an April 17 "town hall" teleconference.

Reflecting church's diversity

Three March gatherings reflected on the diversity found within The United Methodist Church. In the first meeting of its kind, leaders of the Korean American United Methodist community gathered in Englewood, N.J. to share celebrations and challenges and develop a vision to embolden their ministry in the United States. There are about 60,000 Korean-American United Methodists, with 310 churches in 40 states.

A conference on women in Methodism, "Struggle, Faith and Vision: Celebrating Women in the United Methodist Tradition," was held at Scarritt-Bennett Center in Nashville, Tenn., where a new research library was dedicated to the study of organized lay women in mission in the Methodist tradition.

United Methodism's African-American caucus, Black Methodists for Church Renewal, celebrated four decades of advocacy for racial justice and inclusion by challenging itself to develop ministries that make a difference in people's lives. More than 500 people attending the event heard speakers recount the genesis and growth of the nearly 5,000-member caucus and list its challenges and possibilities for the future.

Issues of sexuality

A gay man who had been denied membership in 2005 at South Hill (Va.) United Methodist Church was accepted in March by the new pastor, the Rev. Barry Burkholder, through transfer of membership from a Baptist church.

The denial of membership by the previous pastor prompted controversy across the denomination on the issues of homosexuality and pastoral authority and led to a series of rulings on the case by the denomination's highest court.

In Seattle, the Rev. Kathleen Weber disclosed her homosexuality during a Sept. 30 worship service at Blaine Memorial United Methodist Church, where she serves as associate pastor. A commissioned candidate for ministry, she is on track to be ordained next year.

The United Methodist Church, while affirming that both homosexuals and heterosexuals are people of "sacred worth," does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers the practice "incompatible with Christian teaching," according to the *Book of Discipline*, the denomination's book of law. Church law specifically prohibits the appointment of "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" as clergy.

In October, the United Methodist Judicial Council upheld a bishop's decision that a pastor who changed gender from female to male remains eligible to serve the church.

The council stated that it was not ruling on whether changing gender is a chargeable offense or violates minimum standards set by the church's legislative body, the General Conference. Rather, the court said "a clergyperson's standing cannot be terminated without administrative or juridical action having occurred and all fair process being accorded."

Because the Rev. Drew Phoenix, pastor of St. John's United Methodist Church in Baltimore, is a clergy member in good standing, the ruling means Phoenix will continue to serve his church. But the subject of whether transgender clergy are eligible for appointment is likely to be among issues debated when General Conference convenes next April in Fort Worth, Texas.

Africa rising

In September, a three-day African Bishops Roundtable brought together 12 active and retired United Methodist bishops to the campus of Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe. The bishops, representing congregations from west, east, central and southern Africa, developed strategies against poverty and committed to make the university a partner in their efforts.

Africa University itself celebrated its 13th graduating class in June by awarding 282 degrees to students from 15 African countries and seeing its first recipients from two new master's degree programs.

The university plans to open its first satellite campus in Maputo, Mozambique, in 2008. The project is a collaborative effort with the Methodist University of São Paulo, Brazil, and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Other proposed sites are in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone.

A new 300-watt community radio station, located at the denomination's Liberia Annual Conference headquarters, was dedicated during a March 3 service attended by United Methodist bishops of the West Africa annual conferences.

The Rev. Kefas Kane Mavula was elected and appointed bishop of The United Methodist Church in Nigeria on March 3, his 40th birthday. Bishop Ntambo Nkulu Ntanda, 59, who leads the North Katanga Area in the Democratic Republic of Congo, was elected to his country's senate in January. He is also the chancellor of Africa University.

Malaria campaign

The Nothing But Nets campaign started the year with a \$3 million challenge grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, announced Jan. 4, for the purchase and distribution of insecticide-treated bed nets to prevent malaria in Africa. The campaign's global launch also occurred that day at the NBA store in New York.

The grant will match contributions raised by the campaign's partners: The people of The United Methodist Church, the United Nations Foundation, NBA Cares, Sports Illustrated and others.

The United Nations Foundation also has said it wants to work with United Methodists on an initiative focusing on the diseases of poverty: malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS.

At least 200,000 families in Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, will receive malaria-preventing mosquito nets from the people of The United Methodist Church. The \$1.5 million project was announced by Bishop Janice Riggle Huie of Houston during the annual meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative in New York in September. The church's Texas Annual Conference, where Huie is resident bishop, plans to raise \$1 million by December 2008.

Other significant events in 2007

Dr. James W. Holsinger Jr., 68, the United Methodist nominee for U.S. surgeon general, testified July 12 before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. Questioned about his views on homosexuality, he said his 1991 paper on the topic was written for a denominational committee and does not reflect his position today. The Senate had not voted on his nomination as of the beginning of December.

United Methodists in Maryland joined religious leaders across the state in opposing the governor's proposal for state-owned slot machines. In September, Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, proposed legalizing slots as one measure to close the state's \$1.7 billion shortfall.

Some 6,200 youth and youth leaders from four continents attended the July 11-15 Youth 2007 event in Greensboro, N.C., designed to build disciples by encouraging young people to live out their faith in ways they might not have thought possible.

A protest against locating the George W. Bush presidential library at Southern Methodist University took the form of an online petition started by the Rev. Andrew Weaver, which had gathered more than 11,000 signatures by November. But 10 of the 11 active bishops of the denomination's South Central Jurisdiction affirmed the SMU board's process to bring the Bush library to the campus.

After two years of research, a United Methodist task force in the New England Annual Conference urged its members, churches and investment managers to divest from 20 companies identified as supporting Israel's occupation of Palestinian land.

A March 1-4 consultation in Panama City, Panama, focused on the relationship between The United Methodist Church and independent Methodist churches in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Directors of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, through action of the personnel committee, abruptly dismissed the Rev. R. Randy Day, the mission agency's chief executive, Oct. 9. Retired Bishop Felton May became the interim chief executive.

The Rev. Sam Dixon was elected to lead the United Methodist Committee on Relief; Harriett Olson is the new top executive of the Women's Division, United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, and Erin Hawkins became the head of the United Methodist Commission on Religion and Race.

Passings

Prominent United Methodists who died in 2007 included:

Three bishops who were instrumental in the success of Africa University in Zimbabwe. Bishop Benjamin Ray Oliphint, 83, who led United Methodists in the Houston, Kansas and Louisiana areas, died July 7 in Houston.

Bishop David Jerald Lawson, 77, who served for 12 years as bishop in Wisconsin and Illinois, died May 31 in Franklin, Ind.

Bishop Christopher Jokomo, 64, who led the Zimbabwe Area from 1992-2004, died April 7 in Harare.

Bishop John Wesley Shungu, the first indigenous United Methodist episcopal leader in what is today the Democratic Republic of Congo, died May 9 in Kinshasa. He became a bishop in 1964 and served eight years as leader of the Central and Southern Annual Conferences.

Bishop Carl J. Sanders, 94, who served the Birmingham (Ala.) Area from 1972-80, died March 7 in Birmingham.

The Rev. J. Harry Haines, 89, who shaped the denomination's vision of relief work as director of the United Methodist Committee on Relief from 1966 to 1983, died March 29 in Eugene, Ore.

**Bloom is a United Methodist News Service news writer based in New York. News media contact: Linda Bloom, New York, 646-369-3759 or newsdesk@umcom.org.*

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Philippine leaders speak out against killings

Announcement of UMCOR-Muslim Aid partnership

Bishop Thomas Bickerton talks about Nothing but Nets on "American Idol" Youth 2007

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